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AGAINST ICONICITY: *THE TESTAMENT OF MARY* BY COLM TÓIBÍN

"Are you still in daily touch with the Virgin Mary?" I asked before we rang off.
"I am," she said, "and she is taking a very dim view of you."
Tóibín, *Empty Family* 65

Woman, what have I to do with thee.
John 2:4

1.

In an essay published in *The Guardian* in October 2012, the Irish writer Colm Tóibín writes extensively about the origins of his, then, latest book, namely a novella titled *The Testament of Mary* which gives voice to the mother of Jesus, the world's most famous Mary. Discussing various sources of inspiration for the book,[1] Tóibín acknowledges two works of art, two pieces by two exponents of the Italian Renaissance, which have left an irremovable imprint on his imagination and have largely shaped the creative process behind his re-telling of Mary's story. The two works are *The Assumption of the Virgin* by Titian in the Basilica Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice and *Crucifixion* by Tintoretto in Sala dell'Albergo in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, also in

[1] Those included Marina Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*, E.V. Rieu's translation of *The Four Gospels*, books by the Jewish-Hungarian writer on religious history Géza Vermes, poems by Luoise Glück as well as Bach's cantatas. Tóibín also acknowledges the impact of some other texts onto his novella, in particular the ones he discussed with his students in the New School in New York, i.e. the Greek plays (*Electra*, *Medea* and *Antigone*) and the works by J.M. Coetzee and Joan Didion. (Cf. Tóibín, "Inspiration")

Venice.[2] The former, executed by Titian in the years 1516–1518, shows Mary being raised to heaven by a group of cherubim. Dressed in a red robe and a blue mantle, Mary is a central figure of Titian's altar piece, the bottom layer of the painting being occupied by the shocked mortals, the apostles who, in terror, pray, kneel, gaze in awe and reach to the skies, and the top part overtaken by the figure of God and an angel carrying a crown for the queen of heaven. "There is something so pure about the composition," Tóibín says in his essay,

> [something so pure] that it manages to stretch powerfully beyond the story that Mary, as the mother of God, on her death could not be allowed to decompose in the earth, but was assumed body and soul into heaven. And yet the painting remains rooted also in the sheer glorious shock of such an event, were it to have taken place. (Tóibín, "Inspiration")

Though also dramatic, the latter picture, i.e. one of Tintoretto's masterpieces completed in 1565, is far more disquieting and frenetic, terrifyingly tumultuous. Showing Christ dying on the cross in Calvary and Mary lying unconscious or distraught at the foot of it, the piece does not seem to pay enough attention to what constitutes the central aspect of Christian theology, the act of saving mankind. On the contrary, priority seems to be given to the dozens of human figures flanking the cross, all unaware of the divine sacrifice and chaotically carrying on with their gruesome activities. Tóibín writes about his response to the painting in the following manner:

> This one is rooted in the real world, rather than the world of dreams where Titian's painting lives. The painting of the crucifixion here is 12 metres wide. Its size means that the idea of transcendental space soaring towards the heavens above is replaced with the vast, long, busy world around. Tintoretto shows that while Jesus hung on a cross until he died, many other things happened too. If the sound of the Titian is of angels' unearthly voices, this painting by Tintoretto is filled with the brutal noise of the world. ("Inspiration")

It is precisely a tension between unearthliness and worldliness, divinity and humanity, that one is encouraged to identify as the key factor which provided an impulse for Tóibín embarking on a story of Jesus' mother. The writer himself is most explicit about the role the two paintings played in his decision to address the subject of Mary's life:

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[2] What I find particularly interesting – especially in light of Tóibín's narrative – is that Titian's painting – theologically and dogmatically correct – is to be found in a church, a religious place, while Tintoretto's representation of Jesus' crucifixion inhabits an essentially secular space, namely that of a school.

> I think the gap between these two paintings made me wonder about how the imploring, powerless figure of Mary at the foot of the cross as her son was crucified could have become, in Catholic doctrine and Italian painting, the queen of heaven. The more time I spent looking at paintings in Venice the more I came to feel that the story of her transformation fulfilled a pictorial need, or a storyteller's need, as much as it did anything else. ("Inspiration")

The present paper wishes to offer a discussion of *The Testament of Mary* which will see Tóibín's novella as a text which does, indeed, remain spread – though, as I will argue, not evenly – between Titian's and Tintoretto's visions, between divine iconicity and earthly as well as harrowing humanity, between "unearthly voices" and "brutal noise of the world." In other words, I will attempt to listen to a story narrated by a voice, Mary's voice, which, in Tóibín's own words, is "iconic as well as human" (Tóibín, "Our Lady").

2.

Motherhood and, in particular, the relationship between a mother and a son have always appeared to me one of Tóibín's primary thematic concerns, a "key symbolic matrix," as Anne Fogarty once declared (Fogarty 167). Both his fiction and non-fiction[3] are permeated by highly unusual mother-characters and, according to John McCourt, provide a reader with "the exploration of the tragic contradictions which are at the heart of mother-son relations" (McCourt 149). Tóibín's mothers always defy readers' expectations and stereotypes; instead of being obedient, they are refractory; instead of loving, they are careless and egotistical; instead of compassionate, they are indifferent. His mothers are often absent from their sons' lives,[4] but, simultaneously, they exert an extraordinary power over their fates and remain a perennial point of reference. They haunt their sons who, in return, cannot release themselves from usually unwelcome and restraining maternal influence – both real and imagined. Richard, the main character of Tóibín's *The Story of the Night*, is particularly aware of his mother's inexorable authority which transcends her death:

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[3] Tóibín's 2006 collection of short stories and 2012 collection of essays are both tellingly entitled *Mothers and Sons* and *New Ways to Kill Your Mother*, respectively.

[4] In her essay "After Oedipus? Mothers and Sons in the Fiction of Colm Tóibín," Anne Fogarty writes about this phenomenon in the following way: "The figure of the dead, absconded or recalcitrant mother is a perennial and recurrent motif in Tóibín's novels. Additionally, the space of the maternal and the voided, haunted place of the mother function as central imaginary sites within his fiction" (168).

> I had never known her enough; all of her life she had invented ways to prevent people knowing her [...] Whatever was locked inside her was never released, it did not die with her, and it remains somewhere in the shadows of this apartment; it remains inside me, and I do not know how to get rid of it. (*The Story of the Night* 60)

Tóibín's interest in insurgent, fractious and disaffected mothers can be traced back to his first work of fiction, *The South* of 1990, whose main protagonist Katherine Proctor abandons her son and escapes to Barcelona. She was the first in the panoply of mother-figures that populate the pages of Tóibín's work: the dead mother (e.g. Mary Robertson Walsh James in *The Master* and Fergus's mother in "Three Friends"[5]), the abandoning mother ("A Song"), the estranged mother (Lily Devereux in *The Blackwater Lightship*), the surrogate mother (Dora Devereux in *The Blackwater Lightship*), the ailing mother (Carmel Redmond in *The Heather Blazing*), the abusive and suicidal mother ("A Long Winter"), the drinking mother ("The Use of Reason"), the demanding mother ("A Summer Job"), the suffering and humiliated mother ("A Priest in the Family"), the peripatetic mother ("The Name of the Game"). As well as the afflicted mother ("Beckett Meets his Afflicted Mother"[6]), the absent mother ("Jane Austen, Henry James and the Death of the Mother"), or the jealous and possessive mother ("New Ways to Kill Your Mother: Synge and His Family"). Needless to say, Tóibín also writes about loving mothers, e.g. Lady Augusta Gregory, the protagonist of his short story "Silence" from his 2010 collection *The Empty Family*, who abandons Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, her lover, for the sake of her son; however, what certainly interests the Irish writer most are interrelations which are troubled, complex, the ones that resist banal, sentimental, or clichéd patterns. Like the relationship between Tóibín and his own mother which he described both overtly (in a short memoir of 2011 titled *A Guest at the Feast*) and covertly in a series of autobiographical short stories. One of them, "One Minus One" from his 2010 collection *The Empty Family*, shows a teacher and writer returning to Ireland, his homeland, to assist his dying mother. In its complexity and unequivocalness, the mother-son relation is essentially and unmistakably Tóibínian, as exemplified by the following passage:

> Maybe I should have phoned a few times a week, or written her letters like a good son. But despite all the warning signals, or perhaps even because of them, I had kept my distance. And as soon as I entertained this thought, with all the regret that it carried, I imagine how coldly or nonchalantly a decision to spend the summer close by, seeing her often, might have been greeted by her, and how

[5] This and the following short stories come from the 2006 volume titled *Mothers and Sons*.

[6] This and the following essays come from the 2012 collection titled *New Ways to Kill Your Mother*.

> difficult and enervating for her, as much as for me, some of those visits or phone calls might have been. [...] And as we walked back to see her, [...] there was this double regret – the simple one that I had kept away, and the other one, much harder to fathom, that I had been given no choice, that she had never wanted me very much, and that she was not going to rectify that in the few days she had left in the world. [...] She was wonderful as she had always been. I touched her hand a few times in case she might open it and seek my hand, but she never did this. (*Empty Family* 12)

One unorthodox mother that clearly stands out from the figures inhabiting Tóibín's pages, the one I find most disturbingly memorable, is Molly, the mother of a paedophile priest from the short story "A Priest in the Family." Molly defies all the expectations that might be typically exercised by her fellow villagers as well as us, the readers of Tóibín's story. She is neither faint-hearted nor broken, not fearful, despairing or hysterical. She boldly faces her parish priest, her community and her son. Her attention is divided between the persecutor and his victims; her pain is subtly manifested. Most importantly, she refuses the silence and suppression:

> "Would you do something for me, Nancy?" Molly said, standing up, preparing to leave.
>
> "I would, of course, Molly."
>
> "Would you ask people to talk to me about it, I mean people who know me? I mean, not to be afraid to mention it." (*Mothers and Sons* 167)

In light of the above-stated remarks, Tóibín's decision to turn to the life of the ultimate mother figure could have by no means been surprising to his readers and critics alike. Raised a Catholic in the 1960s Ireland,[7] trained as an altar boy, Tóibín was, in a sense, predestined to write about "our Lady," who, "in all her glory, was as much Queen of Ireland as she was Queen of Heaven"; about "the dutiful Mother of God [who] inspired the dutiful mother, who stayed at home and was meant to remain meek" (Tóibín, "Our Lady").

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[7] In a piece published in *The New York Times*, Tóibín states: "Every night from as early as I remember the family knelt in the evening and said the rosary. Each mystery, as they were called, had 10 Hail Marys; the first part of each hail Mary was recited by a single voice, and then the second part – 'Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen' – by the rest of the family in unison. At the end my mother would recite some extra prayers, including the 'Memorare,' which began, 'Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who sought thy aid or implored thy intercession was left unaided." (Tóibín, "Our Lady")

3.

The Testament of Mary[8] is a revisionary work, the gospel according to Mary,[9] a "revisionist interpretation of religious canonical text" that Mieke Bal has famously called for (Bal 22). When Tóibín first saw Tintoretto's *Crucifixion*, it made him wonder "what it might have been to have been there on Calvary that day and to have witnessed the death of Jesus on the cross, [...] how different it might have actually been from the account in the Gospels" (Tóibín, "Our Lady"). Hence, Tóibín seems to invite the readers of his book to look at *The Testament of Mary* as an example of rewriting, of hypertextual "transposition," to use the category of Gérard Genette (Genette 237). Following Genette's taxonomy introduced in his seminal *Palimpsestes*, one could further argue that Tóibín's piece offers an exercise in "transvalorisation," i.e. in giving voice to a previously marginalised character; an exercise in a process, which, in Genette's own words, "consiste à lui attribuer, par voie de transformation pragmatique ou psychologique, un role plus important et/ou plus 'sympathique,' dans le système de valeurs de l'hypertexte, que ne lui acordait l'hypotexte" (393).

Delivered in unmistakably Tóibínian first-person "intimate style" (Witchel), the only a hundred-and-four-pages long novella gives voice to Mary who remains in hiding in the Greek city of Ephesus[10] and narrates (in a form of

[8] *The Testament of Mary* was originally written as a play (a monodrama) titled *Testament* and was staged in Dublin in 2011 – a production at the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival with Marie Mullen playing the role of Mary and Garry Hynes directing it. A rewritten and extended text was subsequently published as a novel in 2012. Also, in 2012, the original play (with some amendments and under a new title, i.e. *The Testament of Mary*) was staged on Broadway at the Walter Kerr Theatre. This time the play was directed by Deborah Warner, while Mary was played by Fiona Shaw. In 2012, almost simultaneously with the release of Tóibín's work, the Polish artist Zenon Fajfer wrote and directed a play titled *Pieta* (The Pietà; staged in Krakow's Łaźnia Nowa Theatre) which also offers an unorthodox story of Mary's life, with the Mother of God described by the producers as "rebellious and doubtful" (Fajfer). Moreover, Mary was one of the four narrators in Naomi Alderman's alternative portrayal of Jesus' life titled *The Liars' Gospel*, also published in 2012.

[9] Other notable examples of what could be called a "contrapuntal" (Said 66) reading of Jesus' life include Nikos Kazantsakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ* of 1953 (made into a controversial movie by Martin Scorsese in 1988) and Naomi Alderman's *The Liars' Gospel* of 2012.

[10] According to some scholars John got some of his inspiration for the gospel from Greek sources and was familiar with the Greek theatre whose images and motifs influenced his writing. Also, it is believed that Mary lived out her final days in Ephesus (cf. Tóibín, "Inspiration").

confession) selected episodes from her life.[11] She is a woman who, having outlived her crucified son, has "used up [her] store of tears" (4) and waits for "final rest" (3); but also a woman who is watched and questioned by her "guards" (24), the apostles, who want to extract and re-shape her story in accordance with their desires. Though her name is never provided (nor is that of Jesus who is only referred to as "him," "my son," "our son," "the one who was here," "your friend" [9]), her identity is self-evident, primarily by means of Biblical citations, attributions and mentions (e.g. Jerusalem, Cana, Mary and Martha, Lazarus). The narrative comprises interwoven present-tense and past-tense passages, the latter covering selected episodes from the Gospels, i.e. the healing of the paralytic at Bethesda, the raising of Lazarus, turning water into wine at the Cana wedding, crucifixion; the episodes Mary has witnessed as well as those she has only heard of.

Mary's story as narrated by Tóibín is by no means an orthodox and theologically accurate account – hence the controversy it has stirred in ultra-religious circles.[12] First of all Mary subtly questions the divine status of her son and acknowledges Joseph as the boy's father, not his guardian (97–98, 100). Also, in line with the works of the historian Géza Vermes, she sees Jesus as a man of his times, deeply imbedded in the political and social realities of first-century Palestine. When Jesus abandons Nazareth, he, like most men of his age, does it in search of a better life in the capital of the province:

> People [...] began to talk about Jerusalem as though it were across the valley instead of two or three days' journey, and when it became clear that the young men could go there, anyone who could write, or was a carpenter, or could make wheels or work with metal, anyone indeed who could speak clearly, anyone who wanted to trade in cloth, or in grain, or fruit, or oil, they would all go there. It was suddenly easy to go there, but it was not easy, of course, to come back. They sent massages and coins, and clothes, they sent news of themselves but whatever was there held them with its pull, the pull of money, the pull of the future. [...] Such an idea swept through villages like a dry hot wind at that time, and it carried away anyone who was any use, and it carried away my son, and I was not surprised by that because if he had not gone he might have

[11] *The Testament of Mary* largely follows the plotline provided by the Gospels, with some exceptions discussed in the later part of the present paper. According to some critics (writers of fiction, in particular), in places the book is "almost too faithful to the Gospel text" (Alderman). Also, Tóibín deliberately avoids archaisation (in my opinion, to reduce distance and foster a sense of resonance between a speaker and listeners/readers), with Mary using such words as "chair," "cot," and "shoes."

[12] The opening night of Tóibín's play in New York City was marred by over a hundred protesters from the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property. According to the reports, the protesters carried a banner reading "we offer God this public act of reparation and vehemently protest against the blasphemous play *The Testament of Mary*;" while they used their website to post homophobic remarks concerning the sexual identity of the writer, Colm Tóibín, director Deborah Warner, and actress, Fiona Shaw (see Soloski).

> stood out in the village, and people might have wondered why he did not go. It was simple really – he could not have stayed. (14–15)

Her son's companions, the apostles, are also profoundly influenced by the "circulation of social energies" of that time, to use Stephen Greenblatt's term. She considers them "a group of misfits" (8), young men who want to start a rebellion against the authorities and their rule, who excel at "whipping up hysteria among the crowds" (25). Jesus' followers who comprise "malcontents," "half-crazed soothsayers," and "a caravan of hucksters, salesmen, water carriers, fire-eaters and purveyors of cheap food" (37), do not seek spiritual awakening, but are exclusively focused on down-to-earth gains. Mary's distrust towards them is quite unequivocal:

> Something about the earnestness of those young men repelled me, sent me into the kitchen, or the garden; something of their awkward hunger, or the sense that there was something missing in each one of them, made me want to serve the food, or water, or whatever, and then disappear before I had heard a single word of what they were talking about. They were often silent at first, uneasy, needy, and then the talk was too loud; there were too many of them talking at the same time, or, even worse, when my son would insist on silence and begin to address them as though they were a crowd, his voice all false, and his tone all stilted, and I could not bear to hear him, it was like something grinding and it set my teeth on edge, and I often found myself walking the dusty lanes with a basket as though I needed bread, or visiting a neighbour who did not need visitors in the hope that when I returned the young men would have dispersed or that my son would have stopped speaking. (16)

The revisionary character of Mary's narrative is, perhaps, most visible in her attitude towards the miracles performed by her son, many of which she remains cautious and suspicious about. She never calls them miracles, but always refers to them as stories – narratives which might well have been inspired by true events, but which, like any work of memory, fail to pass the test of veracity and are shaped to suit various, often conflicted and contradictory demands.[13] Consignments of bread are provided for the multitudes, but it seems unlikely that the loaves have been miraculously multiplied (46). When Mary asks for first-hand witnesses of Lazarus being raised from the dead nobody can provide her with them (39). Even when she herself participates in the event, she does not know if the miracle occurs or if she – together with the rest of witnesses – is skilfully manipulated into believing that it has just taken place:

[13] "There must have been other stories, and perhaps this one I heard only in part, perhaps something else happened, or perhaps there was no wind, or he claimed the wind. I do not know" (*Testament* 55).

> My son stood up and spoke to those around him, asking that six stone containers full of water be brought to him. What was strange then was how quickly those containers were carried into the room. I do not know whether each one contained water or wine, certainly the first one contained water, but in all the shouting and confusion no one knew what had happened until they began to shout that he had changed the water into wine. (50)

When she visits Lazarus she finds the act disturbing and unsettling.[14] "I still feel," she concludes, "that no one should tamper with the fullness that death is" (31). And, indeed, the consequences of the raising of Lazarus that one finds on the pages of *The Testament of Mary* hardly inspire merriment and celebration of the miracle. Lazarus recognises no one; he cannot lift a glass of water to his lips; he cries in howls. "His roots seemed to have spread downwards," Mary observes. And adds:

> There was something supremely alone about him, and if indeed he had been dead for four days and come alive again, he was in possession of a knowledge that seemed to me to have unnerved him; he had tasted something or seen or heard something, which had filled him with the purest pain, which had in some grim and unspeakable way frightened him beyond belief. It was knowledge he could not share, perhaps because there were no words for it. (45)

The episode which inevitably casts a terrifying shadow over the whole narrative concerns Jesus' crucifixion. Here, again, Tóibín skilfully combines available (his)stories with the imaginings of his own: episodes as well as phrases (e.g. Pilate's dialogue with the mob) known from the Gospels with Mary's unique interpretation of them. Abandoned by her relatives, but, simultaneously, summoned by the apostles since "witnesses will be needed" (66), Mary arrives in Jerusalem to accompany her son in his final hours. Undoubtedly, Tóibín's version of the crucifixion is heavily indebted to Tintoretto's painting. Calvary resembles a typical market place with people talking, laughing, eating, drinking, shouting. "There were other things going on," Mary says: "horses being shoed and fed, games being played, insults and jokes being hurled, and fires lit to cook food, with the smoke rising and blowing all around the hill" (76). However, the element which I recognise as particularly relevant to the present discussion is the deliberately anti-iconic character of

[14] The story of Lazarus as narrated by Tóibín powerfully reminds me of a painting titled *The Raising of Lazarus* by Sebastiano del Piombo which is in the collection of the National Gallery in London. The painting features prominently in the opening lines of Hilary Mantel's *Fludd*: "Against a background of water, arched bridges and a hot blue sky, a crowd of people – presumably the neighbours – cluster about the risen man. Lazarus has turned rather yellow in death. [...] The expressions of those around are puzzled, mildly censorious. Here – in the very act of extricating his right leg from a knot of the shroud – one feels his troubles are about to begin again" (Mantel 3).

Mary's testimony. Tóibín's Jesus is in no way the brave and might warrior that one might recognise from, for example, the lines of "The Dream of the Rood." On the contrary, he is a terrified young man, entirely puzzled by his predicament, who tries to remove a crown of thorns from his head and, metaphorically, deny his divine status. He is a man screaming and howling in pain, a man who resists his persecutors and fights for his life ("he did everything to stop them stretching out his other arm, [...] still he managed to hold his arm in against his chest so they had to call for help" [76]). Equally human is his mother, though her behaviour – bearing ostensible Tóibínian traces – does not conform to a conventional presentation of *mater dolorosa*. Overwhelmed by grief and panic, she is a motionless and silent observer; but, at the same time, she is a mother who will not stay with her son till the very end. She is a mother who – when her own life is threatened – will escape:

> It is only now that I can admit this, only now that I can allow myself to say it. For years I have comforted myself with the thought of how long I remained there, how much I suffered then. But I must say it once, I must let the words out, that despite the panic, despite the desperation, the shrieking, despite the fact that his heart and his flesh had come from my heart and my flesh, despite the pain I felt, a pain that has never lifted, and will go with me into the grave, despite all of this, the pain was his and not mine. And when the possibility of being dragged away and choked arose, my first instinct was to flee and it was also my last instinct. In those hours I was powerless, but nonetheless, as I went from grief to further grief, wringing my hands, holding the others, watching with horror, I knew what I would do. As our guardian said, I would leave others to wash his body and hold him and bury him when his death came. I would leave him to die alone if I had to. And that is what I did. [...] I did it to save myself. I did it for no other reason. (84–85)

The above-quoted passage reveals and manifests the major preoccupation of Tóibín's novella, i.e. to give voice to a suffering mother. Not the Queen of Heaven, not the Mother of God, but simply a mother of an extraordinary man who was used, manipulated and, ultimately, forsaken – by friends and enemies equally.[15] In Tóibín's narrative, theological doctrines concerning the figure of Mary[16] are, indeed, seriously questioned and repudiated (so are those concerning her son); but it is not done in order to undermine the principles of Christian faith, but to create a convincing and plausible character of a mortal woman who has witnessed the demise of her family and suffers over her losses. One of the most memorable scenes from *The Testament of Mary* shows Mary fighting with John and Paul over a chair which belonged to her husband and which she wishes to keep empty. When, against her will,

[15] "The act that was about to take place was going to make a profit for both seller and buyer." (75)

[16] E.g. perpetual virginity, immaculate conception, assumption.

one of the apostles sits on the chair, Mary grasps a knife and threatens her "guardian" with it: "I have another one hidden. [...] If either of you touch the chair again, if you so much as touch it. I will wait, I am waiting now, and I will come in the night, I will move as silently as the air itself moves, and you will not have time to make a sound. Do not think for a moment that I will not do this" (22).

However, Mary's simple, yet poetic confession is most human not – as one would conventionally expect – when she lovingly talks about her son, not when she recalls the Sabbath mornings she spent with him and his father, not when she praises Jesus' intelligence and gratefulness, but when she finds courage to address the more painful aspects of her relationship with Jesus: their growing detachment from one another,[17] his grandiosity[18] indifference and contempt for her. A famous Biblical statement uttered by Jesus in Cana, i.e. "Woman, what have I to do with thee" is offered an entirely different meaning in Tóibín's story. It is not the response of Jesus who is being informed by his mother about the missing wine and who is being implored to act upon it. On the contrary, it is a blunt, haughty and invidious refusal to follow his mother's advice to escape and save his life.[19]

Tóibín's novella is a testament delivered by a mortal mother of a mortal son. The mother who refuses to acknowledge Jesus' divine father, does not believe in her son's resurrection, in saving mankind, who responds to the creators of Christian doctrine: "It was not worth it" (102). Mary also commits the ultimate blasphemy – she starts visiting the pagan temple of Artemis where she prays to the Greek goddess.

> I do not go to the Synagogue now. All of that is gone. I would be noticed; my strangeness would stand out. But I go with Farina to the other Temple and sometimes I go alone on the morning when I wake or later when there are shadows coming over the world, pressing night. I move quietly. I speak to her. In whisper, the great goddess Artemis, bountiful with her arms outstretched and her many breasts waiting to nurture

[17] "He was so far from the child I remembered or the young boy who seemed happiest in the morning when I came to him and spoke to him as the day began. He was beautiful then and delicate and awash with needs. There was nothing delicate about him now, he was all displayed manliness, utterly confident and radiant, yes, radiant like light is radiant, so that there was nothing we could have spoken of then in those hours, it would have been like speaking to the stars or the full noon." (49)

[18] "My son was wearing rich clothes and he was moving as though the clothes belonged to him of right. [...] And he seemed to have grown, but it was merely an illusion brought about by the way he was treated by those around him." (46)

[19] "'You are in great danger,' I whispered. 'You are being watched. [...] Wait until the bride and bridegroom come and then I will leave as if to refresh myself and that will be the signal. You must follow me. You must tell no one that you are going. You must leave alone.' Even before I had finished speaking, he had moved away from me. 'Woman, what have I to do with thee?' he asked." (47)

> those who come towards her. I tell her how much I long now to sleep in the dry earth, to go to dust peacefully with my eyes shut in a place near here where there are trees. In the meantime, when I wake in the night, I want more. I want what happened, not to have happened, to have taken another course. How easily it might not have happened! How easily we could have been spared! It would not have taken much. Even the thought of its possibility comes into my body now like a freedom. It lifts the darkness and pushes away the grief. It is as if a traveller, weary after days of walking in a dry desert, a place void of shade, were to come to a hilltop and see below a city, an opal set in emerald, filled with plenty, a city filled with wells and trees, with a marketplace laden with fish and fowl and the fruits of the earth, a place redolent with the smell of cooking and spices. (103–104)

The significance of the gesture should by no means be overlooked or left unnoticed. Mary does not pray to Jehovah, the Jewish deity who has forsaken his only son. Instead, she turns to Artemis who, according to Greek mythology, pitied and saved Iphigenia, the princess of Mykenai offered by her father Agamemnon as a sacrifice to appease gods, from the death on the altar. Mary seeks consolation in the temple of a female goddess, the one who saves and not condemns to death.

But Mary's story cannot and will not be told as a narrative of doubt, of escape, of fear and pain – a human narrative as it does not comply with the "official" version the apostles want to propagate. John and Paul "scowl impatiently" when the story Mary tells them "does not stretch to whatever limits [they] have ordained" (5), when she says something vague or foolish, when she does not remember what they think she must remember. "They dream of that painting by Titian in the Frari in Venice in all its glory; she has nightmares about the Tintoretto in all its lived and untidy cruelty," Tóibín accurately comments on the dynamics between their contradictory demands and wishes (Tóibín, "Inspiration"). The apostles show no interest in the "true" story of Mary as they have already embarked on establishing the Church[20] which requires a singular, unambiguous and incontestable narrative:

> They want my description of these hours [the hours at Calvary] to be simple, they want to know what words I heard, they want to know about my grief only if it comes as the word "grief," or the word "sorrow." Even though one of them witnessed, he does not want it registered as confusion, with strong memories of the sky darkening and brightening again, or of other voices shouting down the moans and cries and whimpers, and even the silence that came from the figure on the cross. And the smoke from

[20] Tóibín brilliantly manages to capture the birth of the Catholic Church and the status of women in it: "And within this group of men I noticed that there was a set of hierarchies, men who spoke and were listened to, for example, or whose presence created silence, or who sat at the top of the table, or who felt free to ignore me and my companion and who demanded food from the other women who scampered in and out of the room like hunched and obedient animals." (66–67)

> fires that grew more acrid and stung all our eyes as no wind seemed to blow in any direction. They do not want to know how one of the other crosses keeled over regularly and had to be propped up, nor do they want to know about the man who came and fed rabbits to a savage and indignant bird in a cage too small for its wingspan. (80–81)

In their determination to shape Mary's story according to their own desires, they powerfully remind me of Daniel Foe from J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*,[21] the "patient spider who sits at the heart of his web waiting for his prey to come to him" (Coetzee 120). However, Mary, unlike Coetzee's heroine Susan Barton, does not entertain any hope that she can govern her story. On the contrary, she is painfully aware of the fact that her testament will be purged of its uniqueness, while most of what she is about to say will be manipulated by the apostles. A transformation from a human to an iconic narrative, a "sweet story that will grow poisonous as bright berries that hang low on the trees" (86), is, perhaps, most ostensible in the story of Jesus' resurrection. Mother's dream of her son coming back to life, a dream bringing consolation to the grief-stricken mother is overheard by John and ultimately remodelled into a central tenet of Christian theological doctrine. "All is easy to imagine," Mary concludes, but "it is what really happened that is unimaginable" (86).

4.

In a tellingly titled essay "Our Lady of the Fragile Humanity" published in *The New York Times*, Tóibín writes about his character simultaneously inhabiting the realms of iconicity and humanity: "I wanted to create a mortal woman, someone who has lived in the world. Her suffering would have to be real, her memory exact, her tone urgent. But she would also have to live at some distance from the rest of us. She would inhabit a real house, but it could not be the house next door. She would have to have grandeur in her tone as well as deep fragility" (Tóibín, "Our Lady"). However, as this brief discussion of *The Testament of Mary* shows, Tóibín's story – by means of endorsing a number of anti-doctrinal narrative solutions – and his extraordinary principal character are determinedly anti-iconic. Mary is, indeed, a thoroughly unconventional mother, one who resists unambiguous interpretation and simplified summations. She stands for the fullness of being and, consequently, escapes devotional and "flat" presentation which characterises the icon-paint-

[21] One may wonder if *Foe* was not among the texts discussed by the writer with his students in the New School in New York, when Tóibín was beginning to write *Testament* (cf. Tóibín, "Inspirations"). Unfortunately, I have failed to access the syllabus of Tóibín's course taught at the time of writing his play.

ing tradition. Working against Christian theology, against allegorical and fixed meaning, Tóibín, like Elizabeth Jay a few years before him in her alternative and midrashic reading of Lot's wife, chooses for his character "the generosity, the open-ended form of contested, polyphonous interpretation" (Jay 44).

Hence, if I were to identify a painting which closely corresponds to the unorthodox and anti-iconic representation of Mary, I would suggest *The Annunciation* by Simone Martini and Lippo Meni painted around 1333 for the Cathedral of Siena (currently at Ufizzi Gallery),[22] which shows Mary being visited by the angel who informs her that she will become the mother of God. This Mary is not submissive and humble. Her face carries no trace of acceptance or joy. She is frightened, clearly discontent. In a simple gesture of resistance, Mary turns away from the angel, covers and separates herself from the messenger with a blue mantle. The message has not been welcome. It is precisely this Mary, an earthly and mortal woman, a human being implicated in the "greatest story ever told," that I am tempted to see on the pages of Tóibín's novella.

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[22] I am grateful to Wojciech Szymański for directing my attention to the Sienese School of painting and Simone Martini in particular.

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